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ABSTRACT

In collaborative learning, both facilitators and learners are active participants in the process, a sense of community is created, and knowledge is considered to be located in the community rather than the individual. Its guiding principle is that learning is enhanced when knowledge that is created and transmitted is shaped by the activities and perspectives of the group. In adult learning situations, the instructor becomes the facilitator whose responsibility it is to create a climate to foster collaborative learning. In this environment, learners must be willing to listen to and respect different points of view, exercise responsibility for their own learning, and be committed to the group. The traditional teacher role as authority is reframed as a knowledgeable co-learner. Facilitators are also responsible for preparing learners for collaborative work and planning the process. The traditional student role also shifts to a more active problem solver, contributor, and discussant. Issues involved in collaborative learning are cultural dispositions toward competition and individualism; the traditional class structure; difficulty in providing appropriate feedback; and reluctance of learners and facilitators to relinquish their traditional roles. Collaborative learning can provide an environment for democratic planning, acquisition of individual and group insights, development of better judgment, and use of adults' previous experiences. (SK)

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Collaborative Learning in Adult Education

by Susan Imel

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One of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of adult education is the fact that it should be collaborative or participatory in nature (Brookfield 1986). Support for collaboration and participation in adult learning is based upon a philosophical approach to adult education emerging from the progressive education movement, one of several movements upon which adult education's philosophical foundations are based (Elias and Merriam 1980). Although the need for collaboration and participation is emphasized in much of the adult education literature, there is little empirical support for collaborative learning (CL) as the best way to educate adults; there is also little discussion of collaborative learning itself, that is, what it is, how it is implemented, and its strengths and weaknesses. This **ERIC Digest** provides an overview of collaborative learning and describes how the process of collaborative learning can become a part of formal or institutionalized adult education activities (as opposed to autonomous or independent adult learning groups).

What Is Collaborative Learning?

The following form the basis for CL:

- Both facilitators and learners become active participants in the educational process.
- The hierarchy between facilitators and learners is eliminated.
- A sense of community is created.
- Knowledge is created, not transferred.
- Knowledge is considered to be located in the community rather than in the individual (Whipple 1987).

CL has its origins in a number of movements and philosophies, most of which have influenced progressive adult education. It draws heavily from the schools of experiential learning and student-centered learning that are based on the work of the philosopher, Dewey, and the social psychologists, Piaget and Vygotsky. It also uses information from the field of social psychology, particularly small group theory advanced by Lewin. Critical thinking, as a form of education, and problem-centered learning have also contributed to CL (MacGregor 1990; Sheridan 1989).

Collaborative learning assumes that knowledge is socially, rather than individually, constructed by communities of individuals and that the shaping and testing of ideas is a process in which anyone can participate (MacGregor 1990; Novotny, Seifert, and Werner 1991). Furthermore, it stresses the importance of common inquiry in learning, a process through which learners begin to experience knowledge as something that is created rather than something that is transmitted from the facilitator or teacher to the learner (Sheridan 1989).

CL addresses the issue of how authority is distributed and experienced in the learning setting (Bruffee 1987). The preeminent idea behind CL is that learning is significantly enhanced when knowledge that is created and transmitted is shaped by the activities and perspectives of the group, so the facilitator's role as an authority and source of knowledge is reduced (Romer 1985).

How Can Collaborative Learning Be Facilitated?

Adult learning in formal or structured settings, however collaborative, differs from the autonomous learning that adults choose to do because the facilitator usually designs and structures activities to ensure that maximum learning occurs (Bruffee 1987). Thus, it becomes the responsibility of the instructor to create a climate in which CL can occur. Three important elements to foster CL in formal settings are the environment, the role of the facilitator, and the role of the learners. Although the three are intertwined, they are discussed separately.

The Collaborative Learning Environment

CL can take place only in an environment in which participants feel free to exchange ideas and share experiences in order to create knowledge. Therefore, the environment should be unthreatening and democratic, discouraging hostile competition as well as encouraging mutual respect for the ideas and opinions of others (Sheridan 1989). To create this environment, learners must be willing to listen to and respect different points of view as well as tolerate divergent opinions, engage in discussion and conversation rather than speech making and debate, take on and exercise the authority relinquished by the facilitator, and develop a sense of commitment and responsibility to the group. In turn, facilitators must be willing to surrender complete authority for the learning process and become co-learners with other participants (Bruffee 1987; MacGregor 1990; Romer 1985).

Although in adult learning activities facilitators and learners are jointly responsible for establishing the environment, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to take the lead. Brookfield (1986) has observed that one of the facilitator's most demanding tasks is "to assist in the development of a group culture in which adults can feel free to challenge one another and feel comfortable with being challenged" (p. 14). Without such an environment, CL cannot occur.

The Role of the Facilitator

CL calls for a reframing of the traditional teacher role as the authority and transmitter of knowledge. In CL, the teacher becomes a facilitator and enters into a process of mutual inquiry, relating to students as a knowledgeable co-learner; authority, expertise, power, and control are redefined (MacGregor 1990; Sheridan 1989). For facilitators assuming this role, MacGregor suggests that "particularly challenging is the process of reconciling one's sense of responsibility about course coverage with one's commitment to enabling students to learn on their own" (p. 26). Facilitators must develop methods of sharing their expertise without usurping the attempts of learners to acquire their own.

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In addition to taking the lead in establishing an appropriate environment for CL, the facilitator has other responsibilities, two of which are preparing learners for collaborative work and planning for CL. Learners will need to become familiar with the process of CL, develop skills in collaboration and acquire enough content background to permit them to work in a collaborative learning situation. Not all adults are accustomed to collaborative learning situations, and facilitators have a responsibility to describe CL and provide a rationale for its use as well as any training needed to engage in it effectively. Facilitators also need to prepare learners in terms of the content by providing them with a common framework and background from which to begin (MacGregor 1990).

In planning for CL, the facilitator must consider where and in how much of the learning activity collaboration is appropriate; establish and communicate clear objectives; use suitable techniques; prepare content materials, including developing meaningful questions or problems for group work; structure groups; and provide a clear sense of expected outcomes of group work (MacGregor 1990; Sheridan 1989).

The Role of Learners

CL also calls for significant role shifts for the student: from listener, observer, and note taker to problem solver, contributor, and discussant; from low or moderate to high expectations for class preparation; from a private to a public classroom presence; from attendance dictated by personal choice to that having to do with the expectations of the collaborative learning group; from competition to collaboration with peers; from responsibilities associated with learning independently to those associated with learning interdependently; and from viewing teachers and texts as the sole sources of authority and knowledge to viewing peers, oneself, and the thinking of the group as additional, important sources of authority and knowledge (MacGregor 1990, p. 25). Facilitators can prepare learners for these shifts in their roles, including the need to assume greater responsibility for their own learning.

What Issues Are Affiliated with Collaborative Learning?

CL is not without problems and issues. Those most frequently mentioned in the literature include cultural biases toward competition and individualism that militate against collaboration, the traditional class structure that frequently does not allow sufficient time for true collaboration to occur or for group members to establish trust and a sense of group security, the difficulty in providing feedback that accommodates the needs of both the group and the individual, the reluctance of learners to accept their peers as legitimate sources of knowledge, the inability of facilitators to relinquish their traditional role, and the development of appropriate and meaningful collaborative learning tasks (Bruffee 1987; MacGregor 1990; McKinley 1983; Novotny, Seifert, and Werner 1991; Sheridan 1989). Because they did not give sufficient time and attention to this last issue, some adult educators have been accused of providing "warm and fuzzy" learning experiences that did not necessarily result in any real learning (Sheridan 1989).

What Are the Key Benefits of Collaborative Learning?

Collaborative learning--

- provides an environment for democratic planning, decision making, and risk taking
- allows participants to acquire insights into the potential and power of groups as well as develop their independence as learners
- helps individuals develop better judgment through the exposure and resolution of previously unshared biases
- enables adults to draw on their previous experiences by tapping their reservoir of accumulated wisdom and knowledge (Brookfield 1986; Bruffee 1987; Martin 1990; Novotny, Seifert, and Werner 1991).

As yet, there is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of CL as it relates to learning outcomes in adult education. However, research at the primary and secondary levels reveals that students learn better through noncompetitive, collaborative group work than in classrooms that are highly individualized and competitive (Bruffee 1987). Whether or not this is true with adults is still largely untested.

Because of the lack of empirical support for CL, it is unclear whether it should be adopted more widely in adult education. As an approach, CL represents a philosophical perspective about the appropriate goals and methods of education. Adult educators choosing to employ CL should be fully aware of the related issues and problems as well as the careful planning and preparation needed to implement it effectively.

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